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ABSTRACT

Communication via computer networks is becoming more common each day. The differences between computer-mediated communication and face-to-face communication fall into three categories: (1) temporal factors (asynchronous versus synchronous); (2) spatial factors (geographical context and distance); and (3) social factors (participants, their relationships, and their purposes). Transcripts from networks provide a rich new database for researchers as the transcripts of all communications may be easily collected, and the medium demands that the communications be explicit. Current network transcript research includes a comparative analysis of a successful network versus an unsuccessful network, sociometric analysis of relationships among network members based on the number of messages sent and responded to, an exploration of the development of beginning teachers' theories about teaching, and research on the efficacy of the network as a training support mechanism. An example is provided by the Beginning Teacher Computer Network (BTCN), a small, interactive network dedicated to the support of teachers during their first year(s) in the classroom which has been in operation since 1987. Participants are graduates and faculty members of the teacher education program at Harvard Graduate School of Education (Massachusetts). A preliminary research analysis of 15 messages on BTCN shows a statistically significant, greater rate of message response to personal event narrative communications as opposed to the response given to more general description-oriented communications. References and sample messages are included. (DB)

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Computer Networks As A New Data Base

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Computer Networks As a New Data Base
by Diane E. Beals

The advent of interactive computer networking has precipitated a flurry of research on many aspects of network activity and communication. Because most communication on computer networks is stored on disk, a permanent record of all conversations can be reconstructed. Data collection and transcription, typically one of the most difficult problems in psychological and linguistic research, is greatly simplified. This record of communication provides a new data source for psychological, social, and linguistic research.

Communication via computer network is becoming more common each day; "e-mail" and "electronic conferencing" have entered the daily vocabulary of persons from a broadening circle of professions and avocations. This new medium brings with it a new communicative style and codes of conduct, resulting from the opportunities and demands of the technology of the medium. Computer-mediated communication is organized differently from other modes of communication, having its own grammar, its own patterns, norms, and routines for managing the temporal, spatial, and social aspects of interaction. It is these differences in communicative style that make computer networks a rich new source of data for studying interaction and thought.

The differences between computer-mediated communication and face-to-face communication fall into three general categories: temporal factors (asynchronous versus synchronous), spatial factors (geographical context and distance), and social factors (participants, their relationships, and their purposes). Each class of factors has some bearing on the style of communication within each network. Because these constraints vary across networks, each network has a distinct interactive style.

Temporal factors. The timing of network conversations is a major factor in computer communications. Some networks allow for synchronous, or "live" conversations between two or more parties. Participants communicate by typing to each other, and reading immediate responses on the monitor. Others permit only non-real time, or asynchronous, interaction. An asynchronous network requires that the member type a message and deposit it in computer memory for another member to read when she next logs on.

Black, Levin, Mehan, and Quinn (1983) and Quinn, Mehan, Levin, and Black (1983), in a study contrasting communication via computer and face-to-face communication in a college course, reported the presence of "multiple threads" in asynchronous computer conversations. While synchronous conversation tends to be sequential (i.e. each utterance or turn addressing the one immediately previous to it), Black et al. found that a writer would send a message addressing one or more topics that had been addressed in earlier messages. This required the reader to remember or reread previous messages in order to follow the thread of the conversation. They discovered that there was often more than one topic of discussion at any given time. The permanence of the messages allowed the reader to re-access previous topics, and the time between messages allowed the reader

to process several topics at once, a task very difficult to perform in real-time conversations. They also found that computer messages were much longer on average than in-class speaking turns (215 words compared to about 12 words).

Asynchronous communication allows for time to carefully formulate responses, resulting in fertile, thoughtful discussion around a number of interrelated topics. Transcripts of these conversations therefore can be a rich source of users' thinking on specific issues discussed on networks.

Spatial factors. Spatial factors also have an impact on the style of communication. Networks have the capability of linking persons on opposite sides of the globe, and who thus come from different physical and social contexts. Interlocutors in face-to-face conversation rely heavily on visual and auditory cues to communicate and comprehend the function and content of the conversation. However, since networks operate in the absence of facial expressions, eye contact, tone of voice, and shared physical context, network participants often feel, at least initially, at a disadvantage.

Beginning users often report that they are very conscious of all the kinds of nonverbal cues that are not available to them for both conveying their own message and responding to someone else's message (Hiltz and Turoff, 1978). However, more experienced users devise ways of including "non-verbal" information in their messages (Murray, 1988). They use extra punctuation ("!!!!!" or "?!?!?"), asterisks for emphasis ("we've *got* to discuss"), expressives ("humpf"), multiple vowels to indicate intonation ("soooooo"), and even icons that represent facial expression (">:(" , a frowning face if rotated ninety degrees).

Because users make their intent explicit in an effort to communicate the missing contextual features usually found in conversation, a transcript of network conversation is a more explicit record of conversation than the usual transcript of face-to-face conversation. Network transcripts are thus more readable, and easier to interpret than transcripts of face-to-face conversation.

Social factors. Another set of factors that constrain the style of communication in a computer network involve its social organization. Who the participants in a network are, what their relationships are, and what their goals are for participation have consequences for the type of interaction that takes place.

One finding often reported in descriptions of networks is the egalitarian nature of interaction. Kiesler, Siegel, and McGuire (1984) suggest that "electronic communication is blind with respect to the vertical hierarchy in social relationships and organizations" (p. 1125). The absence of context cues, such as appearance, dress, gaze, and tone of voice, removes many of the usual signals that speakers use to identify the social status of their interlocutors. Status titles are absent from computer codenames. Kiesler et al. claim that charismatic persons have less influence on networks than they do in person.

Gavriel Salomon (network discussion, November 2, 1988), who has studied how culture is transmitted by different media, however, has suggested that the style of communication on networks allows for a different kind of status differentiation, based on one's ability to articulate his thoughts in this medium. There are those who feel comfortable with the computer and can thoughtfully and articulately respond to issues discussed. There are others who may feel intimidated by the depth and intensity of the discussions, and thus opt out of them. Status, then, in computer networking, may be based on the ability to make the most of the medium.

Because of the lack of so many social cues, Kiesler et al. suggest that communication by computer network is depersonalizing. There is an anonymity stemming from not seeing to whom one is talking that makes it very impersonal. They cite a computer manual that warns, "Sometimes...users lose sight of the fact that they are really addressing other people, not the computer" (p. 1125-1126). However, in one network connecting beginning teachers to each other, users reported that communication in their network was not impersonal (Beals, 1989a). Although, according to Kiesler et al., communication is "purely textual" (p. 1124), members found "textual" means of communicating paralinguistic emphasis and emotion (as described above). Users did not appear to lose sight of the fact that were talking to other human beings. In an informal survey, several members reported that they missed the non-verbal cues that go with face-to-face communication, such as "seeing people's faces, hearing their regional accents, etc." But they emphasized that "personalities were strikingly present", and "a lot of emotion is communicated through this network". One participant stated that "however disembodied, this is a rare and wonderful audience, irrefutably sympathetic and sharp" (Beals, 1989a, p. 14-15).

The goals of a computer network have an impact on the style of interaction. Levin, Kim, and Riel (1988), in a review of the efforts of several network communities, found that a well-specified task to be performed by the networkers was one hallmark of a successful network. Beals (1989a) found that the social roles that network users play in discussion constrain the types of messages they send. The purposes a person brings to network conversation are reflected in what his messages intend and accomplish.

Transcripts obtained from computer network discussions, then, can yield a rich portrait of network members, their purposes for their discussion, the roles they play in discussion, and their thoughts and feelings about a given topic.

Some Findings from One Network

The Beginning Teacher Computer Network (BTCN) is a small interactive computer network dedicated to the support of teachers during their first year(s) in the classroom (Merseth, 1989). Participants are graduates and faculty members of the teacher

education programs at Harvard Graduate School of Education, and thus share some common background and previously established relationships. Networkers engage in public conversations about a wide variety of issues and problems that confront novice teachers. The network has been in operation since 1987, with three different cohorts (one per academic year) participating.

The conferencing software used by the host computer, Common Ground (Hancock, 1986), gives Network members the capability of engaging in private conversations with other individuals or in public discussions with all participants. All conversations are asynchronous. The design of Common Ground employs the metaphor of a suite of offices, with private offices for each member and public forums for group discussions.

Private conversations consist of sending messages (called "e-mail" in many networks) to another individual's private office. Only the sender and recipient have access to the messages content. While a member was "in her office", she is able to read any private messages sent to her. Approximately half of all messages sent are private.

Public conversations take place on the network within "forums". Forums are electronic conferences or bulletin boards to which each network member has access, both for reading and sending messages. Forums focus on topic areas specific to teaching, such as subject area curriculum and instruction (science, math, language arts, and social studies), classroom management, discipline, evaluation, school reform, and educational philosophy and policy. Members can leave their private offices, and "visit" a forum. Once in the forum, members can read messages sent to the forum (in chronological order), and then contribute their own ideas by sending a message to that forum. Periodically, the system operator purges old messages from each forum.

Conversations in the forums consist of a series of messages sent by Network participants. Each message contains a header (which includes such information as the message number, date and time sent, the addressee, the author, and a "re:" line, suggesting the topic of the message) and the message body (which can be from one to one hundred lines). Transcripts (hardcopy) of all public discussions are collected throughout the year. (A sample of a conversation transcript is found in Appendix A.)

Several different methodologies, both qualitative and quantitative, have been employed to analyze these data. These methodologies have addressed a wide variety of research questions, from issues of the use of narratives in conversations, to the social roles that network members play, to the concerns of beginning teachers.

Responses to personal event narratives. Although network conversations are somewhat different structurally from face-to-face conversation, the network transcripts have provided interesting insights into communicative interaction. For example, because networkers are careful to explicitly mark their references to others' messages (Beals, 1989a; Sacks, Schegloff,

and Jefferson, 1974), it is a relatively simple and highly reliable process to determine the number of responses that any given message receives. Using this methodological resource, Beals (1989b) has found that when a networker told about a specific event that occurred in their classroom (e.g. "Today, in my fifth period class,..."), they received, on average, more responses than did those who gave a more general description of what happens in their classroom (e.g. "My fifth period class is constantly...").

Personal event narratives seem to carry special status in the conversation of adults. According to Polanyi (1985):

> people do not choose to talk to each other at length "about" matters which are not of some interest to them....A "proper" storyteller...will, therefore tell stories whose "points" do not ignore generally accepted truths about the nature of things, but which, rather relate them in some fashion....[S]tories can provide useful insight into what matters to those for whom the story is a "normal", "acceptable", "understandable", commonplace production." (p. 1).

"Stories", as Polanyi calls them, carry special insight into the thoughts and beliefs of those who tell them. These stories reveal more about the teller than other kinds of conversation.

Transcripts from discussions in the "math" (mathematics curriculum and instruction issues), "discip" (discipline and behavior management issues), and "news" (general discussion issues) forums, from one six-month period, were selected for analysis (a total of 240 messages). Discussions in these forums were representative of the types of discussions that take place in all eleven forums. Since the focus was on the differential response rates to personal event narratives versus classroom descriptions, all messages from these forums that included any kind of narrative about classrooms (with temporal sequencing) or description of a classroom situation (without temporal sequencing) were selected. Twenty-three such message were identified.

Two naive judges (persons not involved in the network, or in the study of narrative) and the author sorted these messages into two categories. The first category included "specific one-time events, that happened to the person telling the event, and told a clear beginning and end of the event within the message"; the second category included all others.

Agreement between each judge and the author was 78 percent and 83 percent, respectively. Only messages for which there was 100 percent agreement among all three raters were chosen for further analysis. Fifteen messages met this criterion, eight personal event narratives, and seven "others". Messages in the "other" category included one "parable" (fictional narrative with a moral), and six descriptions without temporal sequencing. No other types of narrative were found.

Length of these fifteen messages (in number of lines as the message originally appeared on the computer screen) was recorded. Transcripts of discussions in which these messages appeared were reread to ascertain the number of messages written in response to them.

Messages in which a personal event narrative was told received an average of 4.25 messages in response. However, messages in the "other" category were responded to by only a mean of 1.00 messages. Because of the small sample size, the difference is not significant ($p < .0831$). However, when length of message (number of lines) is controlled for, the difference becomes statistically significant (see Table 1). There is an interaction between length of message and category of message. For non-event messages, the number of responses remains fairly constant regardless of length. However, for messages that include a personal event narrative, longer messages, on average, receive more responses. A message containing a personal event narrative receives approximately two responses (1.96) for each ten lines of length.

Table 1
Regression Models: Personal Event Narrative and Message Length Predicting Number of Responses (n=15)

Model	Event (p)	Length (p)	Interaction (p)	R^2 (p)	Delta R^2 (p)
I	3.25 (.0831)			.213 (.0831)	---
II		.112 (.0069)		.442 (.0069)	---
III	2.88 (.0433)	.106 (.0046)		.608 (.0036)	.116 (.0036)
IV	-3.81 (.0055)	.004 (.8331)	.192 (.0001)	.929 (.0001)	.321 (.0001)

Why this differential rate of response to personal events as opposed to scripts? Close examination of messages suggest that the personal event narratives are more emotionally charged, or in Labov's (1972) terms, more highly evaluated, than the general descriptions. The writers of general descriptions avoid detail, and thus keep their emotional distance. Providing specific details and evaluations of events peals back one's personal armor, so to speak, exposing what really matters to the teller. This vulnerability demonstrated by the storyteller invokes the response (and support) of peers more frequently than do the safer, more distant descriptions. These preliminary results support Polanyi's assertion that personal event narratives carry a special weight in communication.

Social roles in networks. As mentioned above, social roles are modified by computer networking because of the absence of

many of the usual face-to-face cues of social status, distance, and power. However, differential purposes of networkers can have an impact on the roles they play.

Speech act (discourse function) analysis focuses on what is intended and accomplished by a given utterance or string of utterances. Applying such an analysis to conversation reveals the social roles that speakers play in the interaction. Beals (1989a) found that the purposes that members bring to network conversation constrains the type of message that members sent.

Speech act analysis, with its focus on the function of language, is a common approach to discourse analysis, and has been used extensively to describe several types of discourse, including classroom discourse (Burton, 1980; Mehan, 1979; Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975) and therapeutic discourse (Labov and Fanshel, 1977). Borrowing heavily from the classroom discourse work, particularly that of Sinclair and Coulthard and Burton, Beals designed a scheme for analyzing the function of Network messages.

Numerous schemes for speech act analysis have been designed and tested, but the Sinclair and Coulthard model was chosen for use with Network transcripts because of its ability to encompass different levels of analysis. Transcripts can be analyzed at a "micro" level of clause, at an intermediate level of message, or at a "macro" level of exchange around a topic. This model combines the analysis of all three levels, each level built on the units of the level below. Modifications of Sinclair and Coulthard's definitions of the act, move, and exchange levels were used for this analysis.

Conversational acts are the smallest unit of analysis in this scheme. Each main clause in a message was coded for act. The sample of conversation consisted of all messages sent to five forums in a two-week period. The categories of acts, adapted from Burton, that were observed include marker (indicating a change of topic), summons (seeking the attention of a person or persons), metastatement (comment about the structure of the discourse or message), informative (elaborates on topic), elicitation (question or request for verbal response), directive (request or command), comment (restatement, paraphrase, or qualifier), reply (direct response to an elicitation), acknowledgement, excuse (apology), evaluation (comment on quality of discourse - semantic level) greeting, closing, signature, and expressive (such as "wow").

Coding for act produced very fine-grained results. The description of those results is beyond the scope of this paper. However, the act level coding provided evidence for identifying moves, the second layer of analysis, within a single message. If, for example, a marker were found in the middle of a message, or the writer changed from using directives (offering advice) to using informatives (reporting experience), another move was coded. So, first, main clauses in each message were coded for act category. Then, using the act coding as evidence, each message was coded for conversational move.

The conversational move, in this study, is a unit of conversation that serves a specific purpose within an exchange. Message writers attempt to address a topic with the intent to do something with it; for example, express an opinion or feeling about the topic, challenge another's opinion, provide information about the topic, or offer advice. A message often is intended to serve a single purpose (thus, contains a single move), but sometimes will contain more than one move. Categories of moves were generated to fit the Network discussion. These categories were:

1) seeking advice
2) offering advice
3) seeking information
4) offering information
5) offering emotional support
6) reporting experience (coded as positive, negative, or neutral)
7) offering humor
8) expressing emotion
9) evaluation - quality or appropriateness of another's message (not of their opinion)
10) eliciting discussion
11) offering opinion
12) challenge - of another's opinion
13) assent - of another's opinion
14) defense - of one's opinion - usually following a challenge
15) acknowledgement - of receipt of information, advice, or support
16) greeting
17) announcement - of a specific event
18) apology

The exchange, the next layer of analysis, is defined as a discussion between two or more interlocutors around a topic. It may be as short as two messages or may be several messages long. It is within the exchange level, that Beals looked for functional patterns of interaction.

Frequencies for each move category were computed. From the 97 messages in the transcripts, a total of 146 conversational moves were identified. Of these, 30 (21 percent) were offering opinion, and 23 (16 percent) were reporting positive experience, the two most frequent moves.

Patterns of moves varied according to whether the sender was a beginning teacher or a staff member. Three moves were coded as seeking advice; all were contributed by beginning teachers. Ten of eleven moves seeking information were sent by beginners. Both moves offering support were sent by novices. All moves reporting experience, whether positive, negative, or neutral, were written by beginners, and were all recent past experiences. On the other hand, a total of 15 moves eliciting discussion were sent, 13 of

which came from staff members.

Being a beginning teacher (as opposed to a staff member) was negatively correlated with offering information (r = -.44, p < .046), offering opinions (r = -.52, p < .016), and with eliciting discussion (r = -.76, p < .0001). Being a faculty member was then positively associated with offering opinions, offering information, and eliciting discussion.

These patterns generally fit the goals that each group has for the Network: for novices, sharing support, advice, and information; for faculty members, providing information, and facilitating discussion. One purpose that was not reflected in the data was that of provision of support by faculty members.

While the above trends were noted in the types of moves used by staff members versus beginning teachers, both groups participated in discussions, offering opinions, sharing information and advice, challenging, defending, and assenting to each others' opinions. Although members' perspectives and purposes on the Network were different depending on their role (novice teacher or faculty member), discussions were not one-sided. Faculty members, while eliciting discussions frequently, did not dominate them. Beginning teachers elicited discussions, argued their opinions, and offered support and advice to their colleagues.

Concerns of beginning teachers. A third set of findings from the BTCN involve the topics that beginning teachers choose to talk about.

A teacher's first year in an elementary or secondary classroom has been characterized by "reality shock" (Veenman, 1984), or "transition shock" (Corcoran, 1981), the often traumatic transition from teacher training to entry into the profession. Veenman defines reality shock as "the collapse of the missionary ideals formed during teacher training by the harsh and rude reality of everyday classroom life" (p. 143).

The problems of beginning teachers are well documented, with research studies dating from the 1930's (Eliassen, 1932), 1940's (Flesher, 1945; McGill, 1948), 1950's (Wey, 1951), 1960's (Cruikshank and Broadbent, 1968; Taylor and Dropkin, 1965), 1970's (Applegate, Flora, Johnston, Lasley, Mager, Newman and Ryan, 1977; Newberry, 1977) and 1980's (Corcoran, 1981; Veenman, Berkelaar, and Berkelaar, 1983) delineating the needs of beginning teachers. These studies have resulted in a remarkably consistent list of needs. Veenman, in a review of studies on the perceived problems of entry-year teachers internationally, synthesized the work of eighty-three studies (which, he emphasizes, is not an exhaustive list), and generated a summary list of twenty-four problems as perceived by beginning teachers, based on their frequency of appearance on lists of needs. Classroom discipline was the most frequently reported by entry-year teachers as a problem (mentioned in seventy-seven of the studies). Veenman also reports that discipline was also rated the most serious problem by the subjects in most of these studies. There was a wide range of proportions of teachers

reporting discipline problems. For example, one European study of beginning gymnasium teachers (Frech and Reichwein, 1977, cited in Veenman, 1984) reported that 12 percent had discipline problems, while Lagana (1970, cited in Veenman, 1984) found that 83 percent of beginning elementary and secondary teachers in Pennsylvania reported discipline problems. This is likely due to differences in educational systems and in social, cultural, and historical contexts of the schools and the communities in which they are located.

All of the studies cited above are based on teacher reports of their problems and needs. Veenman's review includes two studies that employed a group interview technique (of several teachers at one time), and four that used observational methods, while all but two of the eighty-three studies utilized individual interviews or questionnaire methods. This raises the question, then, of ecological validity. Were the interviews or questionnaires able to expose what entry-year teachers feel are their real needs? Did they leave some problems out, or overemphasize others? Did the questionnaire or interview questions bias the subjects toward certain problems?

Another means of examining teachers' perceived needs is to "listen in" on conversations between them. Which needs do they talk about (and which ones do they choose not to talk about)? How frequently do they talk about them? How do they discuss these problems among themselves? While it is possible (and even probable) that teachers will not reveal all of their problems in a single setting, exploring the topics that beginners discuss among themselves provides a new perspective on their perception of needs.

Each message in a two-week slice of conversation in five forums was coded for topic (Beals, 1989a). A list of these topics was generated. The frequency (in number of messages) with which each topic was addressed was recorded.

Interesting patterns of topics within forums emerged from the topic list. "Latest", the broadest forum by definition, was the busiest, with thirteen different topics introduced. Topics ranged from the mundane, non-school issue of car repair to a philosophical discussion of what teacher training programs should address. Both concrete information (winter vacation) and abstract ideas (junior high teaching contrasted with high school teaching) were exchanged.

The "math" forum discussion focused mainly on concrete information topics, such as teaching fractions or indirect proofs. "Hums" (humanities forum), the other curriculum area forum, tended to be broader in scope, discussing public school problems and restructuring and history as the core of social studies curriculum.

"General" topics were generally at the information level, including announcements and seeking and offering information about a party. "Manage" consisted mainly of two discussions, one about specific recommendations for coping with the administrative aspects of the job, and one about first year teachers' sense of

isolation and seeking help from colleagues.

The two most frequently addressed topics were problems of public schools (addressed in 22 moves) and avoiding the feeling of isolation by asking for help from colleagues (addressed in 19 moves). Also addressed frequently were the alleged minimal effects of teacher training (14 moves), coping with administrative tasks (14 moves), and the differences between teaching junior and senior high (13 moves). Only one of the five most frequently addressed topics dealt with a concrete, "how-to" issue (coping with administrative tasks). Apparently the broader the spectrum of the topic, the more the topic invites discussion.

In another study of topics of conversation on the Network analyzing larger portions of discussions, all messages in three forums for one year are being coded for topic category. These categories were generated from the current literature on the needs of beginning teachers. Preliminary analysis is revealing a high density of messages that deal in some way with a teacher's view of herself and her relationships with others in her work environment (Cutler, 1990). As the novice teacher is working out issues of relating to others in her new world (students, parents, administrators, colleagues), she is apparently reconstructing her own persona.

Another preliminary finding from network conversation is that discussions appear to progress from specific to general (Merseth, 1989). Topics are often initiated with a specific incident (personal event narrative) or specific context description. This topic is then broadened by other networkers, expressing support, sharing their experience and ideas, and making suggestions. This often leads to more general discussions of educational philosophy. The discussion process thus allows for the broadening of one's perspective on the topic of discussion.

Conclusion

While conclusions drawn from computer-mediated conversation may not necessarily generalize to all other forms of interaction, transcripts from networks provide a rich new data base for researchers. Two major reasons for this is (1) the ease with which transcripts of all conversation can be collected, and (2) the medium's demand for explicitness in communication. Some findings from one network include the existence of a greater rate of response to personal event narratives than to more general descriptions, the effect of purposes and social roles on the style of communication, and a greater understanding of the needs of beginning teachers.

Other applications of network transcript data in research currently being pursued include a comparative analysis of a successful network versus and unsuccessful network, sociometric analysis of relationships among network members based on the number of messages sent and responded to, an exploration of the development of beginning teachers' theories about teaching, and

research on the efficacy of the network as a training and support mechanism.

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Appendix A

Sample Conversation From "Hums" Forum
February 21-28, 1988

msg no. 2613 filed 10:31 PM Feb 21, 1988
from joe
to hums
re: Cars

Now I've forgotten whose car got run off the road on the ice, BUT...Suppose you gave your class an assignment to advise you what car to purchase given money constraints and desires. If my hero Dewey is correct, there is nothing like a REAL project to get student involvement. up.

msg no. 2637 filed 6:00 PM Feb 23, 1988
from tom
to hums
re: State Tests
Are any of your schools doing specific review in anticipation of the upcoming State social studies tests?
My system is not. (This may be because our department chairman is busy getting the MTA and local union to fight the administration in its movce to deal with him.)
It seems to me only logical that we should, for example, review world geography. We know the students don't know it well.

msg no. 2643 filed 7:56 PM Feb 23, 1988
from pete
to hums
re: State Tests

Risking sounding totally ignorant, Tom, but which state social studies tests are these? I've heard nothing about them. Perhaps it's because I only teach psychology, but it sounds like something I should have heard about. Do pray tell...

PEB

msg no. 2710 filed 12:20 AM Feb 26, 1988
from kay
to hums
re: boston public schools
Carol what you say about Boston is true, but then we have an interetsing case in New York of Anthony Cardoza high school where all 11 of the westinghouse science semi or finalists probably come from non-english native speaking homes and lots of other difficult situations. Another interesting fact is that they all are Asian with maybe one counted as Indian. Now what do we make of that?

msg no. 2711 filed 10:09 AM Feb 26, 1988
from anne
to hums
re: Boston Public Schools
The article about BPSchools is certainly disturbing and clearly not limited to Boston. The "failing report card of American schools" was discussed 2/25/88 by Sec. of Education Bennett concerning the national scope of the problem. Obviously lots of folks have simple solutions of the blame the lazy educators type, but I do think some serious concerns are being raised about our profession which need to be adressed. Once teachers get tenure some of them, aided by thorough teacher protection stop learning and striving to improve their teaching. And on the other side excellent teachers - career long learners - fail to receive incentives or rewards above and beyond for their efforts. What do people think about merit pay, the tenure system, and other school reform possibilities?

Anne

msg no. 2716 filed 10:58 AM Feb 26, 1988
from john
to hums
re: Report Card
Some questions:
What instruments were used in determining schools' failures or successes?
How valid are these instruments? Who composed the instruments?
How will a National Assessment Test (Bennett's current horse) improve the quality of what is happening in schools?
Why is the focus of the accountability always directed at teachers?
If teachers are accountable, why are they not involved in policy making? Why aren't the policy makers held accountable?

Is any discussion of reform useful without a discussion of reform of the structures of schools?
Why do we hang on to the corporate model of school structure (circa 1900)? Was that model ever appropriate to the structure of schools?
We seem to know what college prep is about in high school; do we know what other tracks are about? How can we talk about accountability when we are not sure what goals are for those not planning on GOING ON after high school?
What are the appropriate forums for these and other related questions to be discussed and decided on?

msg no. 2741 filed 11:53 AM Feb 27, 1988
from pete
to hums
re: Kay's Comments
It seems to me that certainly there are no simple reasons why Boston Schools (or any other school system ofthat type) are constantly under fire for student drop-out rate, standardized test performance, school violence, illiteracy, etc. I'm sure many people have raised this issue in research, but in addition to Anne's comments about teacher incentives, cultural influences, specifically the family, has an underestimated importance in school atmosphere and student behavior.

Did anyone see 60 MINUTES last week? One thing that struck me about the Japanese schools was the way that the CULTURE was set up to motivate students. There were so few screw-ups in the school because their families simply would not tolerate it. Education was intensely valued. And when you have fewer screw-ups (for lack of a better word) there is less stress on the entire system of teachers/students/administrators. Less stress, more room for positive growth. Perhaps in most urban families, their culture has yet to actually SEE the value of a decent education and instead see it as the place where "those hoity toity kids show off" rather than a place to help yourself.

Maybe this doesn't make much sense, but that's how it seems to look from my limited experiences so far. Any responses?

Pete

msg no. 2744 filed 4:25 PM Feb 27, 1988
from frank
to hums
re: culture and school performance
I agree that families are important for success in school. But the reasons families are not always as supportive as they could be
are very numerous, and cannot be summed up by a short list of attitudes such as "School is for the hoity-toity kids". And I think there are ways to help individual students who come from unsupportive backgrounds or have other educational handicaps.
Some of the problems that hold back and turn off students in my school are non-existant families, parents who have drug problems and neglect or abuse children in various ways, parents who "can't" control their kids, etc.
It seems to me that kids who have no one they can trust or depend on need to learn that education can help them depend on themselves if they manage to sur. So one mission of schools with a problem student population is to get this message across and try to be supportive and/or refer students to supportive people.

Frank

msg no. 2745 filed 8:51 PM Feb 27, 1988
from carl
to hums
re: culture and performance

This sounds like where I come in. I agree with Frank about there being more involved than attitude when it comes to kids who don't see the value in their educations, and that trying to teach and support some self-reliance is part of the answer. But I have to tell you that this is much, much easier said than done. The kids I have come from all kinds of screwed-up backgrounds, and they don't have the confidence in themselves that they'll need to overcome them. At the same time, though, they don't trust people enough to accept that advise and support in many cases. They are INTENSELY independent - or at least non-dependent. They don't really even trust each other. I can't even get them to "cheat" on a test (I've actually told them they could help each other; they won't do it). The result is that, when you try to be supportive, they will often try to take advantage of you. In fact, they'll think you are an idiot for trying. part of the answer, I think - and I never really thought I would find myself saying this - is to be pretty tough with them. What I mean is more in terms of setting high expectations of them, supporting them, and even gettin mad at them when they screw-up. This is a type of attention that they don't get at home or from their friends. I suspect that what I'm saying come close to endorsing the notion of playing third parent, but I don't know that I actually believe that. I do believe, though, that these kids need massive amounts of attention, and that they will not get it from the public schools as they are currently constituted. This brings me to John's comments. I think those very issues are the ones that need to be adressed by teachers, and not by the newspapers and politicians. I really think that we are going to have to push for some very basic changes in the way we consider the concept of schooling. Perhaps this is also part of the answer to dissatisfaction with teacher's unions that I've been seeing on the network.

I look back at this and see that I'm beginning to ramble, however, it also seems like there are places to go with those ramblings. I think I'll come back to this when I don't have roomates milling about the house, talking to me, and stuff. If anyone else cares to try and make sense of this, feel free.

Carl

msg no. 2753 filed 10:46 PM Feb 28, 1988
from joe
to hums
re: 60 Minutest

I understand what Pete is saying but as I saw the 60 minutes show, the Japanese culture and families do NOT "intensely value" anything even closely approximating education. Why am I supposed

to admire any culture which encourages students to "cram" so late at night that they fall assleep in class, then go to a special "cram" school so that they might do well on tests that everyone in the country and on the show stated that the education was meaningless and mind deadening.

I was struck by one overriding memory. The one group happy with the education process were the Japanese Businesses. When I look at their #1 American supporter, Mr Bennett, who over and over again states that we MUST stress excellence or face economic annilation, I begin to get the overall picture.

Perhaps if we push this generation hard enough they'll turn around, tell us to shove it, and we'll get another decade like the 60's.